

EPISODE 008: 10 STEPS TO PLANNING FOR MATERNITY LEAVE

BY NANCY RAY

Intro

I just wrapped up my third maternity leave, and every time I've had a baby, I've learned new ways I can do this thing better. Today, I'm going to share 10 steps for you to take, so you can prepare for maternity leave and easily transition back into work after that sweet baby arrives.

You're listening to Work and Play with Nancy Ray, Episode 8.

Much of our daily lives can be divided into two categories: work and play. Simply put, that is where our life and our legacy take place. This is a podcast all about learning to work and play well, which leads to a healthy soul and a fulfilling life.

Listen in.

Content

A little bit about me, in case you don't know. At the time of recording this podcast, I'm a mama to three little ones: ages three, and one, and five months. Yes, we are very busy. I have taken off three to four months each time I've had a baby, and it has been the best gift I could ever have given to myself and my family.

I'm going to walk you through 10 steps that I take to prepare for maternity leave, so that I can be fully present with my little one, and then I'm going to end this episode with some bonus advice for you, some free advice, the things that I learned that I didn't do so well along the way. I've also created a free download for you that you can find in the show notes, so that you can have these 10 steps, and the email templates and signatures I talk about in this episode, so make sure you go to nancyray.com/podcast/8 to get your free download. Okay, and quick disclaimer before I jump in. Every mama tuning in is different. I know your work is different than mine. You might not have the same flexibility. You might not be able to determine how long you get to take off for your maternity leave. Also, every pregnancy and every baby is different. Every time you have a baby, you become a new version of a mom, and that's okay.

Here's my approach to this episode, okay? I'm just simply going to pretend like I'm your big sister, who loves you a lot and wants the best for you. You take what you will from it, because you know you better than I do, but I do hope that you'll listen and take all of it to heart, because after I've done this three times, I think that you'll learn from my mistakes and do it

more beautifully than I ever did.

Let's dive in, 10 steps to take to prepare for maternity leave.

STEP NUMBER ONE:

Set expectations for clients, vendors, and followers two months out. By two months out, I mean two months before you have the baby. You could even make that three or four months out if you want to, but I think two months out is a good timeframe, simply because it's far enough in the future where they know it's coming, but it's not like tomorrow, which is good.

What do I mean by set expectations? Post about it on social media. Hey, maternity leave's coming. I'm planning for maternity leave. Just talk about it. Add a footer to your email signatures two months before you go on leave. This is a great way to set expectations across the board in your communication. My signature said something about this. I would say, "Warmly, Nancy Ray," and then under that, in all caps I would say, "A NOTE ABOUT MATERNITY LEAVE." Under that, I'd say, "Hey, I'm about to have a baby. I'll be taking maternity leave" this date through this date. "I'm not going to be answering emails during that time. Olivia will be managing the studio and my emails while I'm away. Please contact her," and I left her email address, "if you need anything while I am in Newborn La-La Land."

Make it cute and fun, and just share your anticipation for it. Now, if you don't have someone helping you while you're gone, obviously just change the words and say, "I'm about to have a baby. This is when I'm going to be gone on maternity leave. I will have extremely limited access to my emails while I'm away snuggling my new baby. Thanks for your understanding in advance." That would work, too.

NUMBER TWO:

Make a master list of things to do. Just do a giant brain dump of everything you can think of that you have to do. Then divide them into two categories: tasks and responsibilities. This is especially helpful if you have a team. After making a giant brain dump, I filtered them down into tasks to be completed before I leave, and then responsibilities for my team to take over while I'm gone. I, along with each member of my team, have a maternity planning checklist of tasks and responsibilities that we are slowly checking off prior to my last day. Some examples... Tasks would be to prepare 15 blog post drafts, get my inbox down to zero, schedule my autoresponder, draft all my email marketing campaigns, repair any broken equipment, buy anything new that is needed, so on and so forth. Examples of responsibilities would be my email inbox, sending out bookings, equipment care, blog calendar and blog post scheduling, education customer care, photography bride customer care, product fulfillment. Basically, some of these responsibilities were already my team's. A lot of them were mine, and I wanted those responsibilities to be delegated to my team when I leave, so we're working towards a place where all of those responsibilities are designated for team members, and all of the tasks are completed. That is the goal.

NUMBER THREE:

Batch all of your work ahead of time, especially any content work that you have to do. You want to prep all the blog post drafts, all your email marketing campaigns. Anything that you can plan out and schedule in advance, go ahead and do that, even your Instagram account or any kind of social media plan that you can have in place. If you can schedule those out prior to, that's great. You don't have to do this, though, you also could just take a break from all of those things for three months, and that is okay. That is totally your prerogative, but it's good to think of the things that you could just go ahead and have ready to go, so that your business keeps going while you are resting.

NUMBER FOUR:

Schedule team meetings to discuss lists, progress, and issues that come up along the way. Now, I always underestimate this, okay? I'm always like, okay, we've done one meeting for maternity leave planning. We're good. Everybody's got their tasks, their responsibilities. That's all. Nothing could be further from the truth. What I learned, over the years as I've done this, and my team, has really helped me to go on maternity leave is that we need a lot of meetings just to touch base and communicate with each other before I leave for three months or four months or however long I've determined it to be. This last time, as I was preparing to go on maternity leave, I think we scheduled six team meetings beforehand, just to focus on maternity leave and make sure nothing falls through the cracks. It was a unique time. We were hiring someone new. One of our team members was leaving. It was just really helpful to communicate thoroughly throughout the time as I was preparing to leave.

Schedule those team meetings. Sit down. Schedule them all on your calendar in advance, so you all know these are the days we're meeting. These are the times. This is how long. What that does is it lays the groundwork for you to communicate thoroughly before you leave. Even if the baby comes early, you know that they know what to do and how to take things off your plate.

NUMBER FIVE:

Specifically contact anyone that you know might need you when you're gone. Look at your planner for the next four months, or when you're going to be away, and think ahead. For example, I knew that I was actually going to be shooting two weddings while I was on maternity leave. This was for my second baby. What I did was I went ahead and reached out to those planners and brides ahead of time, so I didn't have to worry about emailing them later. I finalized the timelines. I looked through all the equipment. I made sure that somebody knew how to pack the equipment. I did everything ahead of time that I could. By preemptively doing this ahead of time, it frees up your mind, so that you know when those things are coming up in your schedule. You're not stressed out about them, if there is something on your calendar when you're away.

NUMBER SIX:

Delete all emails while you're away. Okay, I know. Don't freak out. I know that sounds crazy, but I am not kidding. I do want to clarify, though. I'm not talking about completely shutting down your business while you're on leave, but I am saying, redirect all emails to your team if you have one, to other resources or links if you have them, to your Instagram feed, to your blog, and do it all with an autoresponder. Have an emergency email address set up, if that would help you. If you have a team, and you have somebody that can say, hey, this is an emergency thing. You can choose to check that emergency email address once a week, if you want to. You could set something up. We use Slack in our team, and I told my team, "I'm not going to have an emergency email address," but if there is an emergency, set something up in place that will help.

I always said if there's an opportunity that you know I'm not going to want to miss, like a speaking engagement or a wedding booking, here's my husband's number. Text him. He's going to filter it to me, or... That was just basically for the first month of the newborn's life. Then, after that point, I'll turn notifications on, on my phone, for Slack, and we use Slack for communicating as a team. If there's any special requests that you need me for, or a contract that needs to be signed, just shoot me a message in Slack, and I'll see it, and I can get back to you there. We also try to just plan a once-a-week brief check-in, which is really helpful, so if any important emails came in, I could just touch base with a team member all at once.

Okay, so going back to the deleting all emails thing, this is something that I learned from Michael Hyatt. He wrote about it. I'll link to it in the show notes. He encourages to actually do this, and tell everyone that you're doing this ahead of time, and tell them while you're on leave, and obviously, LOL, Michael Hyatt is not on maternity leave. He would take sabbaticals, so I probably should clarify that first, but he would send out his autoresponder and say, "Hey, if you are emailing, great! I'm going to delete this email, and if you really need to reach me, reach back out to me after I'm back, or reach out to this assistant, because I want to come back to a clean email inbox." That's the whole basis of deleting all the emails.

What that does is it lets people know I'm taking my maternity leave seriously. If you really want to connect with me, you're going to find another way to do that, or you can just reach out to this team member. You can have your team member delete and filter pretty much everything in your inbox, which is awesome. That's what I've done all three times, and it's actually worked really well. That brings me to...

NUMBER SEVEN:

To draft and schedule your autoresponder or away signature, so you let them know you're going to be deleting them all. You want to say it in a way that's like, "I care about you, but I'm also going to delete your email." Here goes, it says... This is what mine said for all three maternity leaves:

“Hello, thank you so much for your email. I’m currently on maternity leave until this date. We are so excited to welcome #babyray in July,” or whatever hashtag it is, “into our family. You are welcome to follow along with our journey as new parents on Instagram and on our blog. If you are a current or potential client or vendor, you are very important to us. You will hear from the studio within 72 hours. If you are inquiring about our wedding and family photography services, we are still accepting bookings during this time, and we look forward to connecting with you. All other emails received will be deleted from my inbox, which may seem extreme, but I know how important it is to completely step away from my business in order to be fully present with my family during this time. If you would like to get in touch with me, please resend your email when I’m back at work, beginning in November. Thank you so much for your understanding. Here’s to a new season filled with sleepless nights and lots of cuddles. Warmly, Nancy Ray.” That’s number seven— it’s actually taking the time to craft that and use the words that will really make them feel important while also letting them know, hey, I’m going to be deleting this email.

NUMBER EIGHT:

Send one final email to your VIP list. The VIP list is your family, friends, your close vendors. Just on your last day of work, to seal the deal, say, hey, I just want to let you know, as of today I’m officially on maternity leave. I won’t be back until this date. If you need anything from me, please let so-and-so know, or you can text me if you really need me. Thanks so much.

I really like that last email. One of my friends actually sent one to me and said, “Hey, this is my last day. I’m going on maternity leave now. Just want to let you know, thanks for your prayers in this season of my life.” To me, it really solidified everything that she had put in her email signatures leading up to that time, and posting about in social media. I was like, oh okay, great. my friend is on maternity leave. This is exciting. I was watching for her baby to be born a little bit more, so I think it’s good to send out that one final email. If you have an email list, you can send it out to your whole email list, too, just to let them know, hey, I’m checking out for a few months, and we’re on baby watch, and this is fun.

NUMBER NINE:

Plan to take off at least two weeks before your due date, and plan in some time for you. Now, this isn’t something that I did with Milly, my first, and I really wish I had. I felt like I was thrown from a crazy storm of work life into crazy newborn life, and there was no real room to catch my breath in between. I literally was working on finalizing the launch of a new website while I was having contractions, not even kidding.

I was trying to launch it, and literally, I had the baby the same day that my new website launched, so I always joke that I’m never going to be more productive than I was on that day, because it was a huge brand launch, a new website launch, and I had a baby. It just... That day wins. I’ll never be more productive than that, but at the same time, I laugh about it now. I really do wish that I had some time just to enjoy and savor those last few days before I had had my first. I’ve done that much better with babies number two and three, and it’s

been a real gift, especially if you already have kids, just to spend some quality time with your other kids before your lives change. They really appreciate that time with their mom. If you have the ability to do that, then I definitely encourage you to do that.

Some of the ways that I like to plan in some time for myself before the baby comes... These are my traditions that I like to do is get a manicure and pedicure. I pay to get the house professionally cleaned before I bring the baby home. I get a haircut, and I usually go to Whole Foods to just walk around and buy some fresh fruit and some flowers, just something to make me feel, just feel a little special, and a little bit more like myself, a little bit more relaxed and ready to go.

NUMBER TEN:

The final way that you can plan for maternity leave is actually take time to plan a re-entry phase of about four to eight weeks when you get back from work. I know this is looking really far ahead, because you're probably so consumed with just getting all the work done before baby comes, but this is one thing that's really important, that I think is overlooked a lot, and it's planning your reentry, so if you have a team, telling your team, hey, I plan to come back to work this day. I plan to work this many days a week. I plan to nurse my baby, or pump, or whatever it is that your plan is, just letting them know that this is the plan, looking far enough in advance to know that you're also thinking about what life is going to look like when you go back to work.

One thing that I've learned with my kids is it's not really great to take a solid maternity leave and then just jump back into work eight hours a day, five days a week. I really prefer more of a gradual method. One thing that I do is I tell the world, "Hey, I'm back from maternity leave on March 15th," but guess what? I'm actually back from maternity leave March 1st, just for me and my team to get acclimated again, and me to be in the know of everything that's going on, and honestly for me to get used to working again. Your brain has to adjust. It has been in a totally different place for four months, so giving yourself that grace as you go back to work, like hey, I'm not as sharp as I once was. I need some time to get readjusted and back into the flow of work after having this baby.

The ways that I do that are to tell the world one date and actually come back to work two or three weeks before that date, and also just to start out with one day a week and then two days a week and then three days a week and gradually build up. That's good for you mentally. It's good for your baby. It's also great for your other kids, if you have other kids, because it's not like they have to say goodbye to mommy all at once, and there's that separation anxiety. They just know that, oh, just today mommy's working, but tomorrow I'll be back, and that's okay. That's really helped us a lot.

I want to close my thoughts with some things that I did well, and some things that I didn't do really well with all three of my maternity leaves, so hopefully you can learn from those things. When I had Milly, my oldest, here are a few things that I did well. I took off four months of work. They were pretty solid months off, and I was able to check out mentally, physically, and just be with her. I really needed it with that pregnancy and birth. That was my hardest recovery, for

sure, and I had more emotions, more anxiety with her than I have any other pregnancy, so I really needed that time. I did that really well. I was present. I allowed my body to heal as much as I could, and I just really enjoyed her. I enjoyed my first baby. I didn't worry or think about work too much. I also didn't post much to social media, and I'm glad I didn't. I think I did that well. It felt sacred to me, and I didn't want to share her with the world, and that was okay for that season of my life. I think that I just respected those emotions I was having well, and just said, you know what? I'm not going to post because I feel like I should. I'm going to post when I'm ready.

Now the things I did not do well... I checked out so much that I was completely ignorant of the fact that my team was having a really hard time. At the time, my team was myself, my husband, and Callie, and my husband actually just took a new job and wasn't able to help Callie. I went off and had a baby, and bless Callie's heart. She ran my whole business and was overwhelmed with so much stress, but also didn't feel like she could talk to us, because it was such a special time in our lives. I just didn't make myself very available to her. That's something that I changed in the maternity leaves, moving forward, that I took.

When I had Lyndon, my second, I took off three months really well, and I was okay with that, so I didn't take off quite as long. I actually planned to take off four months, and then I was ready to come back to work a little bit earlier this time, which I wasn't expecting, but I also gave myself grace in that and was like, hey, I'm feeling mentally pretty strong. I want to launch this new course, and I want to do a few things. I would just take her and nurse her, or hold her in my lap, and it was totally fine. I actually felt like working during that season was actually life-giving to me, and so I just said, okay, I'm just going to ease back into work a little bit earlier than normal, and I gave myself grace with that.

Here's what I did not do well: re-entry, re-entering the work. I said I gave myself grace because I entered it earlier, which is great, but I think that it threw my team for a little bit of a loop, because they weren't planning for that. Then, once I got back into work, we didn't have any followup team meetings, like hey, what am I going to take back off of your plate, or what are the responsibilities that I now want. The clarity was lacking big-time in my team, to the point that they were all wondering, what is Nancy doing? I didn't have a clear vision of what I should be doing every day, and they had run things really well while I was gone, but there wasn't a clear definition of how I was going to come back to work and what my role and responsibility was, moving forward.

That's something that, after about two or three months of me working, we had a big team meeting, and it was like what is going on? We were all off. It just was not very good. I didn't set expectations very well. I just did not do the whole re-entry thing well, so I really wanted to do that much better this last time.

When I had Beaufort, my third baby, which is the maternity leave I'm just now coming off of, here are some things that I did well. I took off four months, solid months. It was over the holidays, Thanksgiving, Christmas. It was a natural, easy time of the year just to take off a longer amount of time, and it was great. I enjoyed it so much. I also touched base regularly with my team members once a week throughout maternity leave, on a casual basis. Hey, you need anything? I would pop into the studio. Hey, how's it going? Then I would just leave them and let them keep working.

I also took a couple opportunities that came up during maternity leave that seemed right, and then I delegated them right away. There was an online sale opportunity that I was asked to be a part of. I could've easily said, "No, I'm not going to do that," but I felt like it was a good challenge for me, mentally. I felt like it was a good opportunity for exposure of my business. I decided to say yes to it, and it ended up being a big blessing to be part of that. Those are some things that I did well this time around. I just kept my eyes open and made sure that I was leading the business, albeit at a distance, but I was still involved in making decisions.

Now things I did not do well... I think this time, as I'm transitioning back into work, I'm just personally having a harder time sticking to my hours of work and the boundaries that I've set. I work three days a week, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and I work from... 8:30 is when my nanny arrives, and she leaves at 4:00. I'm nursing Beaufort throughout that time, so there's lots of breaks in between. I think, because of that, I'm feeling like I'm missing out on a lot of work moments during the day, and I'm making up for those work moments in the evening or on social media.

I just, at this point, if I'm honest, feel like my kids are seeing me with my phone in my hand a little bit too much. I'm realizing that, as I'm re-entering back into work, and I just want to continue to set those healthy, good boundaries. We've also had several conversations about how is re-entry going? What do you need from me? Are you good to keep this responsibility? Can I take this one back from you? Olivia and I have really worked out the cadence of my work and my schedule and the responsibilities we share as I'm coming back into work.

On a side note, I know I mentioned not every mom can take off four months, but before I took my first maternity leave, a friend of mine said, "If you can take four months off, do it." I thought to myself, you crazy. Four months is a third of my year. There is no way. I love my work. There is no way I need to take off four months. I'm sorry, that's just crazy. She said, "Listen. If I could go back and do it differently, four months is just a good amount of time, or longer, honestly." I remember thinking, no, I don't know about that, but I decided to listen to her, and I've always aimed for four months with every kid. That has been the biggest blessing. This is my big sister moment for you. If you can take off four months, do it. If you have that ability, do it. I know, like I said, not all of you listening have that opportunity to do that. If you can, if you own your own business and you feel like you can do that long, do it. It's something that you won't regret.

I hope you've learned a few things today about how you can take these 10 simple steps, plan for a great maternity leave, and plan for a wonderful reentry back to work, once your baby's here.

Thanks for listening to episode eight of Work and Play with Nancy Ray. I'd love to close this episode with a quote from Tina Fey,

"Being a mom has made me so tired, and so happy."

I thought that was very appropriate, because maternity leave is all about being so tired and so happy. As a reminder, you can get your free download with my email signatures and templates in

the show notes at nancyray.com/podcast/8. You can find me at nancyray.com or follow me @nancyray on Instagram or Facebook almost daily. Thanks for listening, and I look forward to seeing you next time.

